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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000983

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAI PM ABHISIT BRIEFS AMBASSADORS ON RECENT
PROTESTS AND DISCUSSES THE WAY FORWARD

REF: A. BANGKOK 00974 (BANGKOK CALM SOME REDSHIRT
LEADERS ARRESTED)
1B. BANGKOK 953 (AMBASSADOR CALLS ON ABHISIT)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) On April 16, the Ambassador attended a briefing by PM Abhisit for the diplomatic corps on events surrounding the demonstrations over the past week, including the cancellation of the ASEAN summit in Pattaya on April 11, the subsequent violent protest in Bangkok, and his government's successful efforts to restore order with apparently minimal loss of life. He said he will call for a special session of Parliament next week to debate core issues of the political divide in Thailand, and open the path to reconciliation; these core issues do not include amnesty for violent lawbreakers. He does expect the debate to address such areas as the even application of justice, jobs, the economy, and, importantly, constitutional reform. Abhisit said he recognizes that "yellow" (People's Alliance for Democracy, or PAD) leaders have been treated better in the legal system than their "red" (pro-Thaksin) counterparts; he has therefore asked the police chief to speed up prosecutions of People's Alliance for Democracy lawbreakers from last year. In speaking about the possibility for elections, he said he is always prepared for elections, but in order for Thailand to move beyond the cycle of political crisis in which it is now trapped, elections should not be held before the Constitution is amended. Commenting on the role of security forces during the demonstrations, the PM said the military did an excellent job and that the police were reluctant to act until they were backed up by the military. He noted, moreover, that had the police been in charge of crowd control over the past week, some anti-government "redshirts" likely would have died. End Summary.

BRIEFING

13. (C) On April 16, the Ambassador attended a briefing at Government House by PM Abhisit Vejjajiva for the diplomatic corps on events surrounding the United Front for Democracy

Against Dictatorship (UDD -- aka "redshirts") demonstrations over the past week, including the cancellation of the ASEAN summit in Pattaya on April 11, the subsequent violent protest in Bangkok, and his government's successful efforts to restore order without demonstrators' loss of life. The PM reassured the gathering of Ambassadors that peace and order had returned to Bangkok, that his government was focused on moving forward with national reconciliation efforts and constitutional reform. He said that when the Democrats came to power three months ago, their goal was to achieve a period of political stability so they could move the democratic process forward and achieve reconciliation through justice. The protests over the past week, the PM said, had not changed these goals.

¶4. (C) In the past, the PM said, his government had dealt with demonstrations and protests with patience and restraint, doing all it could to avoid violent confrontation. The RTG dealt with this demonstration the same way, only using force when it became apparent that the protest leaders meant to use violence to topple the government. When a large demonstration of some 100,000 people took to the streets of Bangkok to express their opinions about Thai democracy, his government monitored the protests and responded with patience and tolerance. The nature of the demonstrations changed, however, when the protesters moved their demonstrations beyond the area around Government House and began blocking roads, and again the next day when protesters decided to go to Pattaya and target the ASEAN summit. The government strategy was the same--respond with restraint, let people peacefully express their views, and allow police and military commanders to engage in negotiations with protest leaders over access to the site. It quickly became clear, however, that negotiating was not working and the protesters intended

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to disrupt the summit. By Saturday morning, according to the PM, security authorities felt the summit participants might be in danger and they decided to call off the meeting. He said he declared a state of emergency for Pattaya and Chon Buri to ensure the summit participants could safely depart the venue. When the last one had left, he lifted the state of emergency.

¶5. (C) Moving through the chain of events, Abhisit said that on Sunday the redshirts felt they had accomplished something in Pattaya, and decided they would take their protest back to Bangkok. When it became clear the extent to which the redshirts were prepared to use violence to further their agenda, he decided to declare a state of emergency and issued an emergency decree. Working closely with both the army and police, he said he issued orders to restore law and order without loss of life or severe damage, and in a way that would allow people to peacefully and legally exercise their rights. He said that by late on Monday, April 13, all the trouble spots in Bangkok had been cleared of violent protesters, and only some 4,000 remained in the area around Government House. He said he asked them to leave and by morning they had called off the demonstrations. With the restoration of order in Bangkok, he said he decided to extend the Songkran holiday by two days to allow for some breathing space after the tension of the preceding week and to allow for the clean-up and repair of government facilities damaged in the protests.

MINIMAL LOSS OF LIFE

¶6. (C) Several times during his recapping of events and the question and answer session, the PM reiterated that despite the ill intent of some of the redshirt leaders, he was able to quell the violence with minimal loss of life. He said the only two deaths reported in conjunction with the protests occurred in clashes between redshirt mobs and local residents in a neighborhood called Nang Loeng (alternate transliteration: Nang Lerng). He said two local residents

had been shot and killed by redshirts; security units responded to the clash, but arrived too late. He cautioned the diplomats not to believe the rumors swirling around about numerous deaths from military and police actions to quell the violence, and that virtually all people who were injured -- approximately 135 people -- were transported to medical facilities by police and military units. In response to questions about missing persons or other possible fatalities that may have resulted from the violence, the PM said a "center" or "task force" would be established to fully investigate allegations of further fatalities or missing persons.

VICTORY FOR LAW AND ORDER, NOT THE GOVERNMENT

17. (C) The PM said that although it was a difficult week, he did not recognize this as a victory for the government, but only a victory for "law and order." He said his government's main task now was to arrest the protest leaders responsible for the violence. He said he would like to lift the emergency decree as soon as possible, but he needed to be absolutely sure the government could maintain order. Lifting it, only to re-impose it in a matter of days would do even more damage to the country. He said he tried his best to make everything the government did in dealing with the protests as transparent as possible, with the local and international media observing everything. Everything his government did, said the PM, was in accordance with the rule of law, the legal system and the constitution. (Comment: We are not aware of any credible information to the contrary. End Comment.)

MOVING FORWARD

18. (C) Addressing questions about the way forward for his government, Abhisit said he would on April 20 request a joint session of parliament to debate the events of the last few

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days, and look for a way ahead. He said to ensure stability and order in the country, there must be some constitutional reform, and that he hoped that the events of the last week will allow for some agreement on how to proceed. Other issues the PM said must be addressed included jobs, justice and the economy. He acknowledged issues of equal treatment and justice for pro-Thaksin and royalist protesters, and emphasized that any illegal acts by the royalist "yellowshirts" must be prosecuted; he said he has already told the police that they must speed up the process for prosecuting People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leaders who broke the law during 2008 demonstrations. He said he did not believe the level of violence seen during the April protests was a reflection of the depth of the grievances felt by the rural poor; 100,000 people turned out to peacefully protest when the debate was about democracy. However, when demonstrations turned violent, the numbers dwindled to about 10,000. Just before the protests were called off, the numbers had fallen to roughly 4,000. So, he said, the number of people involved in the violence was actually very small in comparison, and there is a possibility they participated primarily because they were paid to do so. Commenting on a bill now before parliament sponsored by the opposition Puea Thai party to grant amnesty to anyone accused of crimes associated with the political instability starting with the period of the coup (September 2006) through May 2009, he said he had made no decision on it, but amnesty would not solve the problems that were gripping Thailand. He said there may be room for a discussion about amnesty for crimes deemed to be solely political acts, but not criminal ones. He acknowledged that deciding what constituted a political act and a criminal one would be extremely difficult.

19. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question regarding the core reconciliation issues at stake for the opposition, the

PM said that he divided the opposition into four groups: the rural poor who are worried that the government will not look after their interests; those who are unhappy with the government because of the way it came to power; those who want real democracy, political reform and equal treatment for both redshirts and yellowshirts; and Thaksin's cronies who are only interested in looking after the interests of the former premier. Abhisit said he was willing to talk to all these groups with the exception of Thaksin's cronies. He said there was nothing to say to that group. Abhisit said his side had tried to engage the opposition but failed to reach agreement on reconciliation and constitutional reform.

¶10. (C) The PM told the group that holding new elections was always a possibility, but said constitutional reform must take precedence for two reasons; in elections under the 2007 constitution, if someone on the executive committee of a political party violates the campaign law, the Constitutional Court is required to dissolve that party and strip the political rights of its executive committee members; and, in this environment, an election would be held in an atmosphere of political intimidation. These factors made an election at the current time undesirable.

SECURITY

¶11. (C) Responding to questions about accountability for the security forces, Abhisit said that the use of force in Thailand in response to a political crisis was a very sensitive issue. The loss of even one life would likely not be tolerated by the Thai public; one of the strategies the redshirts tried to use to topple the government was to show the government lacked legitimacy because of loss of life and damage in dealing with the demonstrations. He said he worked very closely with both the military and police during the crisis; the military performed well, and there was no truth to rumors that he would replace General Anupong as the Commander of the Royal Thai Army. The PM also maintained that, although the police deployed in Pattaya were properly trained and equipped, they were reluctant to act. (Note: Others have told us that the police in Pattaya had specific instructions not to use force. End note.) He said the police, when backed by the military, could be effective, but

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if they had tried to disperse the demonstrators in Bangkok, there would have been more casualties. The PM assured the diplomatic corps that there would be significant improvements in security for any future regional meetings held in Thailand; the type of disruption in Pattaya that caused the ASEAN summit to be canceled would not happen again.

JOHN